

MAKING AND FINDING ONESELF

JAN BRANSEN

Department of Philosophy
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

1. Dutch farmer or Surma warrior?

The Dutch performer and director Arjan Ederveen once made a mock documentary about a farmer from the Northern part of the Netherlands who underwent a series of, so-called, *trans-cultural* plastic surgeries that turned him into a black warrior of the Surma-tribe, a tribe that lives in the impenetrable wilderness of Zaire. These surgeries were the practical result of an extended period of uncertainty that came to an end when the farmer finally made up his mind and came to the undubitable conviction that he really was a Surma warrior unfortunately, and mistakenly, born into the body of a Dutch farmer.

Despite its incredible queerness, the movie succeeds in making the audience inclined to believe the farmer's story. We see interviews with his parents, his wife and children, his counselor, the surgeon, and with himself, and we come to understand how this man suffered from childhood onwards from deep feelings of alienation from his social and natural environment. We are told that this farmer is admitted to a mental ward where, by lucky accident, he hears the sound of African drums which touch him very deeply. An agitated attempt to know more and ever more of the Surma tribe whose music he heard follows. He reads books and watches videos about the Surma, and slowly comes to believe that the incredible fact must be true: he *is* a Surma warrior born in the wrong place and in the wrong body.

Once we've understood his condition, we almost feel his relief and happiness ourselves when he is told of the possibility to undergo a series of trans-cultural plastic surgeries. And, perhaps more plausible, we almost feel the pain of his wife ourselves, the pain that accompanies the process of converting her husband into a black warrior, a process that implies an irreversible alienation from the man she married.

Ederveen's absurd movie introduces in a dramatic way the problem I want to discuss in this paper, which is the problem of whether there can be such a thing as knowledge of one's real self, and, if so, whether it can provide reasons for action.

2. That's him all over

As a preliminary I should like to make a few general remarks on the importance of the problem and the appeal of Ederveen's movie. It seems to be a fact of life in the Western world at the close of the twentieth century that people have much more options to choose from than their ancestors used to have. There are many causes for this tremendous increase: science and technology create options where there used to be none (it is now possible, for example, to choose the gender of our children); economic prosperity multiplies options (we can buy thousand different cars sprayed in a million different colours, and eat an incredible amount of different dishes in hundreds of different restaurants); globalization confronts us with many unthought-of alternative forms of life; etc.

A related, although different fact of life in the present era is the radical decrease in power of moral authorities. It is related, because this decrease is also one of the causes of the growth in options we face. But it is an important feature of contemporary life in its own right as well. It seems increasingly to be the case that it is *up to us* to determine the value of the options we can choose from. This does not, of course, imply a radical subjectivism or relativism. The fact that it is up to us to determine what is of value, does not imply that everything is equally worthwhile or equally worthless, nor that nothing could be valuable in itself, nor that something could only have the value projected on to it by us. The fact that it is up to us whether something is valuable could mean that you have to know something about us — something deep or essential — to be able to determine which alternative is *our* option, that is, which alternative is *us all over*. If this is the case, it means that not any option will do: the right option is the one we *should* choose if *we* would choose. And this is not an empty phrase, as everyone knows who discovered hockey is not their cup of tea, or who discovered that John is Mr. Right, or having children not like them, or Utrecht really her city, or Mary a nurse all over, etc. And we have to understand Ederveen's movie as claiming that being a Surma warrior is him (i.e. the person mistakenly present as if a Dutch farmer) *all over*. And this appears to be such a deep fact that everyone involved just has to accept the sacrifices that come with the conversion.

Evidently, Ederveen has the best answer to the question how it could be possible for a Dutch farmer to sincerely believe he should convert himself into a Surma warrior: this is the best thing to do because *deep down* this person *really is* a Surma warrior. But, of course, this is also a very unsatisfying answer, because we haven't the faintest idea what it means. This gives me the aim of this article: to understand the ways in which claims of self-knowledge can generate justifying reasons for action.

3. Metaphysical queerness

It is evident that, although we might be able to imagine the kind of liberating process the Dutch farmer is going through, and although we might be acquainted with dramatically less disturbing examples of similar conversions, most of us will be too worried by the incredible queerness of this movie to think it plausible. The radical divergence between on the one hand the Dutch farmer's everyday life and appearance and on the other hand his so-called real self as a Surma warrior will be a source of profound disbelief. For one thing, many of us will have difficulties to accept that persons can have mature and specific selves that are radically independent of the social and cultural environment in which they live and grew up. That is to say, we can imagine that persons are forced to live a life that does not fit them, a life that frustrates the satisfaction of most of their wants and needs, or, even more serious, that hinders the development of most of their capacities. We will be familiar with the stories of homosexuals that could not come out, and with the stories of women that could not but spend their lives in the kitchen. Consequently, we can imagine that it makes sense to say that persons can have real selves that are seriously incompatible with their everyday life and appearance. But what might seem too unlikely to be conceivable, is the presence in a Dutch farmer of a mature self that has all the detailed characteristics of a type of person that has its social and natural habitat in such a specific part of the world as the wilderness of Zaire.

Yet I think we have to take care not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The problem of the Dutch farmer is after all, although very extreme, quite similar to all these everyday problems in which we have to make choices that will have tremendous impacts on the course and direction of the lives we shall live. I will, therefore, propose the following

reformulation to be able to sidestep metaphysical difficulties and to save the problem from Ederveen's weird fantasies. When the Dutch farmer says he really is a Surma warrior, I shall take him to say that (1) he is a person that should live the life of a Surma warrior, (2) because 'being a Surma warrior' is one of the *alternatives of him*¹, and (3) this alternative is most valuable.

4. The concept of an 'alternative of oneself'

The concept of an 'alternative of oneself' is the key to a metaphysically innocent understanding of the way in which self-knowledge can be normatively significant. The concept is best introduced by means of a distinction between two types of options: alternatives *for* oneself and alternatives *of* oneself. The first type can be identified without references to the agent for whom the alternatives are options. The second type of alternatives, however, cannot be identified without reference to the agent for whom these alternatives are options. Let me explain.

Suppose I'm looking for a new coat and am in two minds about whether to choose a brown or a blue one. I can think about both options without thinking of me and even without thinking of my own preferences. I can think the blue one is more beautiful, without being aware of the fact that this implies that *I* consider blue to be more beautiful than brown. Both coats are alternatives *for* me. They are alternatives *for* me in exactly the same way in which they could be alternatives *for* numerous others. To describe them as alternatives I need not refer to myself, nor to anyone else, for that matter.

Many situations in which I have to choose can be described correctly without mentioning me and without paying attention to what is characteristic of me. If someone asks me whether I want coffee or tea, it makes no sense to think I first should find the answer to the question what is characteristic of me. Of course, the fact that I choose coffee, or tea, is informing about and is informed by what is typical of me, but it would be out of place to emphasize that. Of course, choosing coffee rather than tea is a choice for 'me getting coffee' and not for 'you getting coffee'. In that sense there is always an implicit reference in such a choice to the one who chooses, but it would be mistaken to think such a reference reveals something significant about the identity of the one who chooses.

This is mistaken in the case of choosing coffee, and it would, most of the time, be mistaken in such cases as choosing a coat, although one could imagine situations in which even such a choice would be significantly informed by the chooser's identity. This could for example be the case when a teenager needs a new coat and is worried about the possibility that she will wear this coat while meeting the guy that will turn out to be her partner for life. In that case, the options will not be the brown or blue coat, but the future scenarios in which it will be a characteristic fact about the teenager's identity that she wears a brown or a blue coat.

There are, however, situations in which it is not possible to describe, nor even to identify, an agent's options without reference to the agent himself. This is for example the case in a well-known example of Bernard Williams in which someone sees two persons in danger.² He cannot save both because they are too far away from one another. The crucial difference between them is that one of them happens to be the agent's wife and Williams argues that this is an important difference that is very difficult to appreciate from an impartial moral point of view. It seems evident in this case that one of the alternatives (saving his own

¹ I introduced and developed this concept in Bransen (1996, 2000).

² The example is discussed in 'Persons, Character, and Morality' in Williams (1981), pp. 17-18.

wife) is incomparably better than the other one. And we see this once we understand that we *cannot* describe the options this agent has ('I save my wife' or 'I save that stranger') *without* referring to the agent's identity. An impartial redescription ('I save this woman' or 'I save that woman') gives a totally wrong picture of the situation in which this agent finds himself bound to do one thing or another.

Of course, the impartial description could be the right one for another agent, one that has no personal ties to either one of the persons in danger. Such an agent would face alternatives *for* himself, but the man in Williams' example would face alternatives *of* himself, or actually (most likely, at least) merely *one* alternative. The choice this man makes will be informed by and be informative of this man's identity. Actually, the man can do only one thing in this situation, and that is to save his wife. That, after all, would be the only way for this man to continue *his* life. If he would doubt, or save the stranger instead of his wife, we could only understand this as a dramatic attempt to put a stop to *his* life — i.e. we could only understand it by not understanding what reasons this man (*this* man) possibly could have had for what he did.

The concept of an alternative *of* oneself is designed to clarify the strong connections between an agent's identity and the options he faces. And that is why this concept can be usefully applied to the case of the Dutch farmer. For let us concentrate on his ponderings in the mental clinic. He is inclined to believe that he really is a Surma warrior, he has heard about the possibility to undergo a series of trans-cultural plastic surgeries, and has discussed with his counselor the possibilities of moving to a tribe in Zaire once converted. What should he do? He loves his wife and children, he is very frightened by the prospects of such a dramatically new and alien future, yet he is so deeply unhappy with his present life, so totally convinced that it isn't his. What are his options?

Well, it is easy and very tempting to think of them as a number of courses of action open to him. He could stay home with his wife and children. He could go to Zaire. He could change the appearance of his body. But it is crucial, or so I should urge, to take notice of the fact that every such course of action will force him to make changes to the set of properties that could truthfully be said to be properties of him. That is, each option involves an essential reference to part of his identity. Each option is, in fact, an alternative *of* himself, not merely an alternative *for* himself. He cannot describe any of his options without saying something very important about his (moral) identity. Each choice would be a continuation of his life, but in a very specific direction, one that is incompatible with other, but apparently equally crucial parts of his identity. That's what makes it such a difficult choice. Which alternative of himself is most characteristic of him? That's his question.

And precisely because that is his question, it is not possible for the Dutch farmer to describe his situation as if he should make a choice from a set of alternatives *for* himself, alternatives that do not imply a reference to his identity. The brown and the blue coat are in this sense alternatives *for* someone, even if we could recast that choice in terms of a choice between alternatives *of* oneself, as a choice, to put it this way, between 'the blue coat is me all over' and 'the brown coat is me all over'. But the case of the Dutch farmer is different, for it cannot be recast in terms of a choice between alternatives *for* himself. There is no neutral agent X who is offered a choice between living the life of a Dutch farmer or the life of a Surma warrior. No, the issue in this case is that the Dutch-farmer-who-is-a-Surma-warrior is forced to choose between continuing 'his-life-as-a-Dutch-farmer' or continuing 'his-life-as-a-Surma-warrior'. We could almost put it like this, and say that the farmer is living two lives at once for all his life up till now, or is two persons in one, and has reached the point (given the

knowledge he now has of both alternatives *of himself*) at which it is impossible to do just one thing that could, and would, count as a continuation of both lives. The fact is, as it were, that one of the alternatives *of himself* should be dropped.

This sketch of the Dutch farmer's predicament in terms of alternatives *of oneself* does not imply any metaphysical extravagances. It just implies that we sometimes need reference to an agent's identity in order to be able to describe the options this agent has to choose from. But does the sketch help us solve the Dutch farmer's practical problem? If both options are alternatives *of himself* it seems to be as much true to say this man *really is* a Dutch farmer as it is true to say he *really is* a Surma warrior. If both options are similar in this respect, then how could we make progress in situations like this and conclude that one of these alternatives is most valuable.

5. A 'response-dependency' account of the value of alternatives

I have suggested that we should replace the supposedly factual statement that the Dutch farmer is really a Surma warrior, by the evaluative statement that a particular alternative *of* this man, 'his being a Surma warrior', is most valuable. Although this is an evaluative claim. I should like to save its cognitive character (the fact that the claim expresses how things *are*) without reintroducing metaphysical extravagances. I should like to, because it is characteristic of the entire process the Dutch farmer is going through that he cannot but conclude that he has discovered a normatively significant *fact* about his identity. It is characteristic of his problem that his reasons for action can only come from claims of self-knowledge. It is not so much the case that the Dutch farmer *wants* to be a Surma warrior, but that he just reaches the conclusion that the fact is that he *should* want to be a Surma warrior.

I can account for the cognitive character of these statements about the value of certain alternatives *of oneself*, and can do so in a way that does not imply metaphysical extravagances, by defending a so-called 'response-dependency' theory of moral properties.³ According to such a theory statements about moral facts are formally identical to statements about secondary qualities. These latter statements clearly are about states of affairs, even though the fact that something *is* 'bitter' or 'fragrant' or 'red' depends upon responses of appropriately equipped subjects. That is, a tomato is red and round, but is so in different ways. The roundness of the tomato is a primary quality. The tomato is round, independent of whatever perceptual relations that could hold between the tomato and possibly perceiving subjects. The redness of the tomato is, however, a matter of the holding of particular perceptual relations between the light reflected by the tomato's surface and the characteristic response of our perceptive faculty. The tomato's redness is a secondary quality, a quality that is essentially relational, a quality that exists just in virtue of the relation between the tomato's surface and our perceptual faculty. This means that it is literally false to say that 'red' is just the name of light with a particular wavelength, and equally false to say that 'red' is just the name for a particular activity of our perceptual faculty. Red is no property of any of the relata, but a property of the way in which both are related.

This does not mean that the redness of the tomato is not an objective reality. The tomato *really is* red, even though this is a complicated affair because the reality of this redness is the result of two objective components: (1) the wavelength of light reflected by the tomato's surface, and (2) the characteristic response of our perceptive faculty. It is

³ See e.g. Johnston (1989, 1993), McDowell (1978, 1985), Pettit (1991), Smith (1989).

characteristic of the response-dependency theory to accept as *a priori* true that in normal circumstances and for normal perceivers these two objective components are conceptually related to one another. That is to say that *if* I am a normal perceiver and am in normal circumstances, *then* I can infer from the fact that I respond in a particular way to some phenomenon (I see, for example, a green tomato) that this phenomenon *is* as it appears to be (i.e. the tomato *is* green). The same is true *vice versa*: *if* I show Jim a red tomato, and know he is a normal perceiver and in normal circumstances, *then* I can infer he will have the experience of seeing a red tomato.

In a similar way we can, according to the response-dependency theory, determine whether a particular state of affairs has moral properties such as ‘valuable’, ‘fair’ or ‘justified’. The idea is this: *if* I am a normal subject and am in normal circumstances, *then* I can infer from my own characteristic and normatively significant response to a particular state of affairs that this state of affairs *has* the moral properties that belong to my response, just as a tomato *has* the property of being red if I *see* it as red. Thus, if I am a normal subject and am in normal circumstances, and am inclined to believe that bear-baiting is wrong, then I can infer from my own characteristic response that bear-baiting *is* wrong.

Three elements play a role in this analysis of the moral properties of alternatives: (1) the characteristic response of a judging subject; (2) the fact that this subject is confronted with the alternative under normal circumstances; and (3) the fact that the subject is normal. It is important to emphasize that the normatively significant fact (i.e. the fact that some state of affairs *really has* moral properties) is, according to this analysis, not a matter of whether the judging subject has good reasons for her judgement, but simply a matter of the fact that the circumstances and the subject in question are *normal*.

It is evident that the use of, and the emphasis on, the term ‘normal’ in this analysis of moral properties will raise a lot of good and important questions.⁴ I cannot but neglect these questions here, but hope to show in the remainder of this paper how the response-dependency theory makes a clever and at the same time justified use of the ambiguity inherent in the term ‘normal’. For on the one hand ‘normal’ means ‘what we are used to’, but on the other hand it means ‘appropriate’ or ‘favourable’.

In the case of colour perception we know quite a lot about our eyes and about the relevant features of the circumstances to be able to determine whether ‘what we are used to’ is also ‘appropriate’ or ‘favourable’, or not. We know, for instance, that a colour-blind person is not a normal subject for the detection of colours (his eyes are not appropriate), and this is so irrespective of whether the colour-blind person is used to his own characteristic responses to patches of green and red. We also know that the light of certain streetlamps does not create normal circumstances (this light is not favourable to the detection of colours), and this would be true even for the unlucky person that happens to live his entire life in the light of such streetlamps. This does not, of course, mean that we, who are not colour-blind and make use of the light of the sun, do know for sure that we are *appropriate* subjects in *favourable* circumstances. But we do know that we are *normal* subjects in *normal* circumstances, and as long as we are not troubled by our own characteristic responses, there does not seem to be the need to stress that we use ‘normal’ here *merely* in the sense of ‘what we are used to’, and not also in the sense of ‘appropriate’ or ‘favourable’. The idea is, basically, that as long as we are not

⁴ Many of these questions are asked by David Lewis in his (1989). See also Pettit (1999).

explicitly required to reflect on the ambiguity of the term ‘normal’, there is no need to refrain from assuming both meanings could be applicable.

Two short comments. Firstly, I have indeed suggested that we do know quite a lot about the characteristic responses of our eyes to light of various wavelengths in many different circumstances. And I meant to suggest, by that, that we do not yet know that much about our own characteristic responses to the normatively significant properties of alternatives we face. I can imagine we’ve only made a first, and very small step into the exploration of the normatively significant features of the universe. It seems much too shortsighted to take for granted that there are clear and definite limits to the acquisition of moral knowledge.⁵ Secondly, the use of the ambiguity of the term ‘normal’ I advocated above ascribes a very crucial role, in the moral domain, to those practical problems that present themselves to us as soon as we are troubled by the responses of ourselves we are used to, i.e. as soon as we feel the need to reflect on the differences and similarities between what we are used to and what is appropriate and/or favourable.

6. Interlude: practical problems and self-knowledge

Let me recapitulate. All of his life the Dutch farmer is troubled by the responses of himself he is used to. As long as he can remember he is unhappy with himself and with the life he lives. The drums from Zaire stir him up. Bit by bit he comes to the conclusion — in my reformulation — that he can understand his problem at last in terms of having to choose between two alternatives *of* himself. One of these is a deeply unhappy Dutch farmer, the other a Surma warrior who can only be recognized as such when he first undergoes an extended series of trans-cultural plastic surgeries. And little by little the Dutch farmer comes to accept the incredible fact: this second alternative *of* himself, this Surma warrior born into the wrong body is — again in my reformulation — the most valuable alternative *of* himself.

In generating the normatively significant self-knowledge he needs, the Dutch farmer goes through three phases: (1) feeling troubled by what he is used to; (2) understanding his predicament in terms of having to choose between alternatives *of* himself; and (3) determining the most valuable alternative. I should like to suggest that these three phases are characteristic of the ways in which we could cope with a particular kind of problem, namely the kind of problem in which we need self-knowledge to provide us with reasons for action. This is the kind of problem that dominates contemporary life in Western societies. It is the kind of problems addressed in popsongs and advertisements that talk about the need to become yourself, to play your own part, to be true to yourself, and to do your own thing. Of course this is not always and not for everyone a practical problem. But sometimes it is...; and, if my diagnosis is right, this will start with a first phase in which you feel troubled by what you are used to, upon which a second phase follows in which you need to redescribe your problem in terms of alternatives *of* yourself, and this leads to a third phase in which you will have to determine which of these alternatives is most valuable. There is no need to assume that these phases will follow one another neatly, but we will be able to distinguish between them in virtue of the kind of self-knowledge available.

I should like to argue that almost all serious practical problems could be handled in terms of the account suggested here. I don’t feel able, however, to do that in this paper. But in

⁵ It is of course problematic to talk about ‘our characteristic responses’ in the sphere of morality, as if to deny the value pluralism that is currently so characteristic of the moral domain. But on the other hand it seems to me just as problematic to deny the possibility of characteristic responses in the sphere of morality.

order to safeguard my proposal from an uncharitable attempt to dismiss the case of the Dutch farmer as nothing but a postmodern fantasy, I shall present two sketchy reformulations of problems everyone knows and will be inclined to take seriously.

Suppose you're 38 and very happy with your new boyfriend. For the first time in your life you've met a man you want to be the father of your children. You are in heaven when you discover you are pregnant, but the fairy tale is ruined by the midwife who informs you about the possibility (the need?) of prenatal diagnosis. What to do? Here is my reformulation: (1) understand that you're troubled by what you are used to (the felt joy of becoming a mother, the habit of listening to medical professionals); (2) reformulate your predicament in terms of alternatives *of yourself* (having to choose to become a well-informed mother of a child with Down's syndrome, or an intended victim of abortion, or a self-selected ignorant, worrying pregnant woman, etc.); (3) find your way out of this problem by determining which alternative *of yourself* is most valuable. Of course, I'm not saying that this reformulation will lead to a general solution to problems like this, but it will help you focus on what is of importance: the things you are used to that cause trouble, the better descriptions of the alternatives *of yourself*, your characteristic and normal responses to the normatively significant properties of these alternatives *of yourself*.

Or suppose your son has committed a crime and hides from the police in your attic. Suppose the police arrested an innocent man who is very likely to be sentenced to many years in jail due to the public pressure on the police to convict someone. Of course you should turn in your son, but could a mother be asked to do such a thing? In my terms this would become: (1) understand that you're troubled by what you're used to (protecting your children *and* being a decent citizen); reformulate your problem in terms of alternatives *of yourself* (the mother who turned in her son, the accessory, the woman who condemned an innocent man, etc.); (3) find your way out of this problem by determining which alternative *of yourself* is most valuable. Again, such a reformulation does not produce general solutions to problems like this: weighing alternatives *of oneself* is too much of a particularistic undertaking for that.

In the remainder of this article I shall discuss the three levels of self-knowledge involved in the kind of reformulation of our practical problems I'm endorsing.

7. Being troubled by what you're used to

I argue that people should try to reformulate their practical problems in terms of a friction between alternatives of themselves. But how could people track down these alternatives of themselves? And what makes an alternative an alternative *of* some particular person? Ederveen's Dutch farmer was very deeply touched by the sound of African drums. But how on earth could we believe that these drums led him to discover an alternative *of himself* — an alternative that, according to my account of the concept, can only be identified by means of referring to the identity of a person we're only acquainted with as being a Dutch farmer? What kind of individuating reference could that be? It seems the man either is or is not a Dutch farmer. And if he is, he simply cannot be a Surma warrior, which would imply that it would be meaningless to say we cannot identify this 'Surma warrior'-alternative without referring to this man's identity.

If things like this could be possible, what about a fancy story of a man who was very deeply hit by a statue of Napoleon, and who came to believe that the incredible fact must be true: Napoleon is one of the alternatives *of him*? Do I really wish to argue that we have to take such bizarre fantasies seriously? Which account of personal identity could be compatible with this idea of there being alternatives *of oneself*?

This last question is important, but too big to be dealt with in this article. Here I shall just assume that it makes sense to say that an alternative is an alternative *of* the person who considers it if the person needs this alternative to be able to understand the problem he faces. The idea is that practical problems arise within a situation in which you're troubled by what you're used to. And what you're used to is characteristic of, and characterised by, your identity.

In the case of the Dutch farmer this means the following. As long as he lives the Dutch farmer is troubled by what he is used to. He is used to his body; yet he feels uncomfortably alienated from it (it is so strangely white, he discovers). He is used to his overalls, and the flat countryside; yet it bothers him that his overalls cover his entire body, and he abhors the lack of shelter in the polder landscape. Etc. After the discovery of the other alternative of himself he gets troubled by what he is used to as well. After all, he is used to the smooth and ritmic movements incited by the sound of these drums; yet he feels uncomfortable in dancing like this. And he is used to his skirt of leaves, yet he is very much ashamed of his nudity. Etc.

The hope is that the Dutch farmer could acquire a first kind of self-knowledge by recognizing a pattern in the list of all the things he is used to but feels troubled by as well. That's why he first needs a complete and detailed list of all the things he considers to be normal, even though they cause psychic discomfort as well. The hope is that there will be a pattern in this list, a pattern that could be explained by the discovery of a couple of (incompatible) alternatives *of* himself. And the suggestion is that such an explanation would be forthcoming because the reality of these incompatible alternatives cause this pattern in the first place. The idea in short is that investigating this list of troubling though normal features of one's life allows for an 'inference to the best explanation'.⁶ The apparently incoherent set of feelings that are related to what someone is used to and what he is troubled by, could suddenly appear to be well-ordered and organised around two incompatible alternatives of himself. The discovery of the Surma warrior as an alternative *of* the Dutch farmer, incredible though it is, finally helps him to succeed in understanding himself and his predicament.

8. Discerning alternatives *of* oneself

The model of normatively significant self-knowledge I'm discussing here allows for much creativity in the process of discerning alternatives *of* oneself.⁷ This creativity (fuelled by an agent's imagination and his knowledge of the available social, cultural, historical, theoretical, and narrative resources) is similar to the creativity used in science to formulate hypotheses. I would favour an account of alternatives *of* oneself as the referents of hypotheses — statements that derive their plausibility from the impact they have on the intelligibility of the patterns that exist in the set of normal things we're used to but are troubled by as well. The creativity needed to design/discover/recognize alternatives *of* oneself does not at all allow for arbitrariness (at least not for an arbitrariness that exceeds the arbitrariness we find in respectable forms of science). The domain of self-knowledge is an ordinary epistemological domain in which 'anything goes' is not the rule. The aim of the undertaking is to respect

⁶ Charles Taylor has borrowed this notion from the philosophy of science to improve our understanding of the moral landscape. See Taylor (1989).

⁷ However, I don't think Napoleon could have figured in the Dutch farmer's story for two reasons. First there is the complication of the enormous time gap between the dates related to the life of the Dutch farmer and that of Napoleon. But, more importantly, is the particularity of Napoleon as a distinct person himself. The very idea of an alternative *of* oneself implies that the alternative *is* the very same person the alternative is an alternative to.

epistemic servility⁸ — one really wants to discover alternatives *of* oneself, and one really wants to be guided by what is the case. And what is the case, is that you're troubled, in complex and even incoherent ways, by what you're used to. To understand why this is so, and how this could be so, is the aim of the second phase of self-knowledge. I might put it as follows: it is in virtue of its tremendous explanatory power that the Dutch farmer comes to accept that this incredible fact must be true: a Surma warrior is one of the most prominent alternatives *of* himself.

9. Determining the best alternative of oneself

There is one last form of self-knowledge the Dutch farmer needs to acquire in order to be able to know what would be the best thing to do. After all, it is one thing to know which alternatives *of* himself allow a person to explain the pattern exhibited by the set of normal things that trouble him, but quite another thing, knowing this, to be able to find a way out he can wholeheartedly agree with. The Dutch farmer is confronted with *two* alternatives of himself, and it is implausible to assume that one of these immediately and obviously appears to be the most valuable one. The emotional costs, among other things, that come with choosing to live the life of the Surma warrior are, for example, extremely high.

It is conceivable (and sometimes actual) that the required forms of self-knowledge all come at once. There are people who suddenly recognize, after years of misery, two alternatives of themselves — one of them deeply unhappy and married, the other one divorced and about to start again — and who immediately understand, in this very act of recognition, that the second alternative is obviously the better one. This seems to happen; it is apparently quite easy completely to overlook a real alternative of oneself in the habit of accepting that sadness is a part of ordinary life.

The third phase of self-knowledge suggested by my reformulation of certain practical problems is evaluative self-knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the normatively significant properties of the alternatives of oneself a deliberating subject in doubt is confronted with. It is the kind of knowledge the response-dependency account of moral properties is about. It is the kind of knowledge present in the characteristic response of a normal subject in normal circumstances who is confronted with an object that has normatively significant properties.

An important assumption here is that alternatives of oneself always have normatively significant properties, and accordingly — for connected in an *a priori* way — that subjects always have normatively significant responses to such alternatives. This is not a gratuitous assumption, but it appears to me as plausible as the assumption that the surface of objects always have a colour, and accordingly — for connected in an *a priori* way — that subjects always have a colour experience when they perceive the surface of objects. That's just the way the world is: we cannot imagine what it could possibly be like for the surface of, say, a tomato not to be coloured at all. And according to the response-dependency theory of moral properties the same is true in the domain of normatively significant properties. That is just the way the world is: we cannot imagine what it could possibly be like for an alternative *of* oneself not to have any normatively significant properties at all, and accordingly — for connected in an *a priori* way — we cannot imagine what it could possibly be like to face an alternative of oneself and not to have a normatively significant response.

⁸ The notion is used by Pettit (1993).

The problem of the Dutch farmer, however, is not a matter of the absence of normatively significant responses to the alternatives of himself. Quite the contrary: there are *too much* and on top of that *conflicting* responses. The Dutch farmer is so tired of having to live his life on the farm in the polder; yet he would very much prefer to stay with his wife and children. But then again, he feels so incredibly at home with the Surma, even though he is very afraid of having to undergo trans-cultural surgery, etc.

According to the response-dependency account of moral properties a situation in which there are such conflicting responses is a situation in which the subjects involved are not normal and/or the circumstances involved are not normal. This gives the Dutch farmer something to pay attention to. He should start looking for those aspects of his own subjective involvement that make him not an appropriate subject for the detection of the right normatively significant properties. And he should also start looking for those aspects of his circumstances that make them unfavourable to the detection of the right normatively significant properties. There is no general recipe for these investigations. No doubt he will have to talk and talk, but also engage in quiet contemplation, use his creative imagination, but also be sensitive to his innermost feelings.

It is unlikely — as unlikely as in cases of scientific knowledge of, for example, black holes — that the Dutch farmer will reach a state of absolute certainty. But much less than that could be sufficient, even in the domain of normative significance. For suppose someone defends the view that bear-baiting is in particular cases the best thing to do. Confronted with such a claim I would feel perfectly confident to maintain that either this person is inappropriate to detect the normatively significant properties of bear-baiting, or is thinking about the phenomenon in unfavourable circumstances, or both. I shall just assume, in such a case, that there will be interfering elements and that I will be able to discover them if only I shall have enough time to continue my search. This assumption is of course not based on indubitable certainty, but it shows the confidence that belongs to the peace of mind with which we sometimes accept the consequences of a conviction.

It is this peace of mind that is characteristic of the third phase of self-knowledge. It is the peace of mind characteristic of the Dutch farmer who accepts the incredible fact that *deep down* he *really is* a Surma warrior. Or, in the terminology introduced and defended in this paper: it is the peace of mind that comes with determining the most valuable alternative of oneself.

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